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ABSTRACT

The views and practices of literacy advocates who focus on workplace literacy foster an impoverished understanding of adult literacy and, ultimately, life itself. They reduce literacy to something that is "functional" in the reductive sense of serving someone else's ends as a functionary. A "functionally literate" person is a consumer of someone else's (for example, corporate capitalism's) language, ideas, and ideology rather than an active agent and producer of language, self, and society. Gaining workplace literacy is dramatically different from the goal of adult literacy education: to help adults gain greater control over their lives. Teaching reading in small active groups rather than using one-on-one tutoring, workbook-driven instruction, or independent computer use helps produce adults' ability to step outside themselves and see the world from a different perspective. Adult basic education students' perceptions of what constitutes functional literacy relate to contextual situations that are not limited to doing a job. Consequently, poetry, stories, drama, jokes, riddles, and language play of all types offer a natural basis for literacy education. Developing literacy range and power takes time, so educators must be honest about what and how little can be gained in workplace literacy lessons. They must resist attempts to trivialize the power of reading and writing. (Contains 21 references.) (CML)

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Workplace Literacy Education:
Some Questions and Concerns

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What is literacy and what is it for? There are varying perspectives on the nature of reading and writing, some complex and sophisticated and others bordering on the nature of simple-mindedness. Likewise, some people see literacy as a means of social and political engagement while others regard it as a utilitarian tool needed to keep the economy running. There is a dramatic emphasis today, especially among politicians and businesspersons, upon workplace reading and writing. Literacy instruction is becoming synonymous with job training.

Many views of adult literacy, such as those advanced by "job literacy" or "workplace literacy" advocates, ignore the range of language functions (Halliday, 1973; 1978; 1989). Instead they focus on the basic literacy skills needed to perform in a very narrow range of situations with a narrow range of texts, such as, learning how to read manuals, instructions, and directions for getting a job done (for example, see Sticht, et. al, 1987). Such views and practices foster an impoverished understanding of adult literacy and, ultimately, life itself. Literacy is reduced to something that is "functional" in the reductive sense of serving someone else's ends as a functionary. A "functional literate" in this sense is a consumer of someone else's (for example, corporate capitalism's) language, ideas, and ideology; she is not an active agent and producer of language, self, and society.

My purpose in this essay is to explore, and challenge, this restricted notion of literacy and adult literacy education. First I examine the goals of adult literacy education. Then I discuss the implications of these goals. Specifically, I look at the context and form of literacy education, its content, and the

developmental nature of literacy range and power. My primary objective is to instigate a close and serious consideration of workplace literacy and its implications among adult educators and policy makers.

Goals of Adult Literacy Education

Over the last decade or so Mezirow (1978; 1985; 1989) has explored and argued for a transformational view of adult education; his ideas and concept of transformation also apply specifically to adult literacy education. Briefly, Mezirow argues that the goal of adult education is to help adults gain greater control over their own lives. This entails being able to step outside of oneself, if you will, and see the world more clearly, critically, and from a different perspective(s). Mezirow calls this "perspective transformation" (1978). Such transformation is based upon social transaction and dialogue with others, especially with those who can help us see the world in a multiperspective manner (Mezirow, 1989). In this regard, Mezirow's work is similar to that of Paulo Freire (1973) who argues that the role of the adult educator is to help adults see beyond and through a limited or false consciousness that has been acquired through socialization.

Perspective transformation requires that we look at the adult student as an agent who is able to, or has the potential to, act on her world; she is a producer and not simply a consumer of ideas, information, and ideology. Moreover, this means that we must look at the adult student as a <u>whole</u> and complex person who daily through oral language engages in a wide range of language functions and who now needs or wants to extend these same functions to written language. We

cannot look at her simply as a partial person, for example, as a worker, or as someone unemployed, or as a parent. Such restrictive perspectives of adults as often set forth by workplace literacy advocates are spurious according to Mezirow (1985, p. 150):

> Distinctions between intellectual, personal, and social development as alternative goals of adult education become patently spurious. They are integral dimensions of the same process; they are not understandable separately, and they are to be judged by the same set of criteria--their approximation to, implications for and movement toward the ideal conditions of self-directed dialogic learning.

Lastly, Mezirow argues that the adult educator must make an active commitment to helping adults see through and struggle against restrictive social and economic conditions and institutions. On the one hand, this means that the adult literacy educator is much more than a neutral transmitter of basic skills; her actions, or lack thereof, have social, political, and ideological resonances. On the other hand, this does not mean that the adult literacy educator must be politically "at the barricades" so to speak. Mezirow contends that there is no simple linear relation among perspective transformation, transformative teaching and learning, and social action. He says that there are many different kinds of learning and many kinds of action (Mezirow, 1989). The important thing is that the adult literacy educator is consciously aware of the complexity, say, between literacy and employment and does not merely accept the simple-minded explanations put forth by politicians, corporations, the media, and others.

The goal of adult literacy education as a means of perspective and, possibly, social transformation is dramatically different from the goals being

pressed by the corporate world and many workplace literacy advocates. These individuals and institutions see literacy education primarily as a means of accommodation whereby individuals are trained (not educated) to meet the varying and changing demands of business and the marketplace. Literacy is perceived as limited and "functional" because adults are perceived as necessary functionaries within the larger system. Literacy education is something to be done to adults by employers, educators, and governments in order to prepare them for a changing workplace. There typically is no discussion of how literacy education must be tied to multiple perspectives and perspective transformation; instead, a dominant perspective is presented as being the "correct" one. As Mezirow contends, "Society mythifies popular meaning perspectives and defends them through organized interest groups" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 106). This is precisely what is happening today with the almost-manic concern over workplace literacy.

Implications for Adult Literacy Education

If we agree that adult literacy is a transactive and constructive process involving a range of language functions and one which must be integrally tied to perspective and, possibly, social transformation, what are the practical implications for adult literacy education? They are several including: 1) the context and form of literacy education; 2) the content of such education; and 3) the long-term, developmental nature of literacy range and power. I will deal with each of these in turn.

The Context and Form of Literacy Education

How we structure literacy instruction is vitally important: "the ways in which reading and writing are learned are at least as important as literacy per se in influencing cognitive development" (Walters, et.al, 1987, p. 863). If literacy is a constructive and dialogic process that offers us opportunities for "rewriting our lives" (Scholes, 1989, p. 155) and transforming our perspectives as we use it across the range of language functions, then its social aspect is paramount. The social nature of language (for example, see Bruner, 1986 and Vygotsky, 1978) and adult literacy (for example, see Fingeret, 1983 and Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989) has been explored and documented so extensively in the professional literature that failures to acknowledge its importance are mind-boggling.

The structure of adult literacy instruction therefore should reflect the social, dialogic, and political nature of language and literacy. One-on-one tutoring may allow for social interaction and dialogue but, by its very nature, it fosters the (usually unconscious) "banking" of skills, information, and world view of and by the tutor into the head of the adult student. Since the tutor is typically middle-class and the student lower-class and a member of a minority group, this results not in perspective transformation but in the transmission and continued mythification of popular meaning perspectives. Learning circles and small participatory groups of learners "animated" by an instructor-learner (Kazemek, 1988), on the other hand, tend to lessen the possibility of such "banking" and provide for a learning situation in which a variety of perspectives are shared, explored, and tested.

Such small group social interaction and learning will necessarily raise the kinds of social, political, and economic questions that scholar-teachers like Freire (1973; 1985) have documented. Narrowly-focused workplace literacy programs don't foster, or even welcome, such questions and instead are designed simply to get the adult onto the job. But Collins (1989) asks in whose interest is such limited training: the adults or the corporate/government establishment acting under the banner of "national interest"? She contends that we "need programs that create a politically, as well as a technically, literate workforce" (1989, p. 28). Learning circles and small active groups can foster perspective transformation and the dual goals that Collins posits in a way that one-on-one tutoring, workbook-driven instruction, and individual, isolated computer use cannot.

This is not to say that computers do not have their place in adult literacy education. They do, but, once again, we must look at how they help to comprise the context and form of such education. Programs which place the individual adult before a computer screen and attempt to teach him "basic skills" in a manner that is more compatible with Skinnerian psychology and programmed learning than it is with cognitive science, sociolinguistics, and the complex possibilities of the personal microcomputer undercut the very nature of literacy and literacy education that I have argued for above. Once again, we must ask in whose interest is such limited training.

Nevertheless, the microcomputer can, and should, be incorporated into programs dedicated to perspective transformation, social and political dialogue,

and economic betterment. Collins and her colleagues (1989) have described workplace literacy programs which not only prepare people for jobs but also provide "the ability to take greater control over one's life and environment" (Collins, et. al, 1989, p. 457). The computer is used by these students within a holistic context of literacy learning to write business letters, complaints to landlords, essays dealing with sexual harassment on the job, divorce, and AIDS, and a play about life as a battered woman.

The Content of Adult Literacy Education

The functions and uses of literacy are many, and there is a plurality of literacies. Depending upon the interplay of the cultural context, specific situational context, nature of the text(s) at hand, and the particular reader's purposes, needs, and wants, the application of literacy strategies, both in reading and writing, will vary, sometimes dramatically so. Writing a letter of complaint to a landlord about shoddy building maintenance is different from writing a personal letter to a friend or, as a waiter, writing a meal order. While much of the workplace literacy literature and rhetoric ignores this complex range of functions and uses, I want to highlight it.

Contrary to much of the literature dealing with workplace literacy and the commonplaces now associated with it, people do not necessarily enter or remain in literacy programs because they want to get, keep, or retrain for a job. Assuredly, economic betterment and security may be a key motivational factor for further developing one's literacy abilities, but it is only <u>one</u> among many. The rather extensive research of Beder (1990), Beder and Valentine (1990), and Hayes

and Valentine (1990), into ABE students' reasons for engaging in literacy education is illustrative. Beder found that adults are concerned with the perceived utility of literacy, but that notions of utility vary according to adults' life-cycle status: "Rather than being motivated by a single factor, most adults are motivated by multiple factors with some motivators being greater than others" (Beder, 1990, p. 9). A young, single adult's perception of utility will probably differ from those of a young adult in charge of a single-parent household or an 80-year-old widow living in retirement.

These differences in perceptions of literacy and its utility are what workplace literacy advocates typically ignore. Complexity is reduced to a pejorative simplicity: man and woman (supposedly) live by bread alone and thus want and need sufficient literacy skills to function on the job. Hayes and Valentine (1990), however, found that ABE students' perceptions of "functional literacy" are complex and related to specific contextual situations and demands. Their perceptions of functionality often differed from those of their instructors, the categories set forth by the Adult Performance Level Project (APL), and the notions of literacy inherent in the materials used in their programs. Beder (1990, p. 15) succinctly sets forth the implication of these differing perceptions:

> This suggests that ABE which is narrowly directed towards student job acquisition or economic gain will fail to address the motivation of a large segment of the target population who are motivated to attend simply because they wish to improve themselves in a general sense.

If we highlight the diversity among adult students' motivations and the differing functions of literacy instead of ignoring them, then we begin to see the

importance of what Halliday (1989) calls the heuristic and imaginative functions of language. Rather than being "frills" or "school stuff," poetry, stories, drama, jokes, riddles, and language play of all kinds offer us a natural basis for literacy education. Narration is trendy in psychological and literary circles today precisely because of its importance. According to Bruner, narrative thinking and language use is complementary to, though unique from, pragmatic thinking and language use with its emphasis upon formal reasoning, close analysis, and so on. Narrative thinking and language use emphasizes the particulars of experience instead of universals; it tends to highlight specific contexts. Moreover, it is something we all do all the time. We truly might be better called the storytelling animal than the language using animal.

Thus, for our purpose of exploring the content of literacy instruction, it would appear that the functions often ignored or slighted in programs, especially workplace literacy programs, are the most important (or, at the very least, complementary to more "useful" or "marketable" functions). Bruner says that what is at the core of storytelling and the literary narrative is "an utterance or a text whose intention is to initiate and guide a search for meanings among a spectrum of possible meanings" (Bruner, 1986, p. 25). And this is exactly what literacy education committed to dialogical engagement and perspective transformation is about: the personal and social engagement with and exploration of differing meaning perspectives, different ways of seeing and being in the world. One might well argue then that the imaginative function of language as realized through storytelling, story reading and writing, oral histories, journals and diaries, language experience texts, and poetry/song lyric reading and writing is the sine qua non of adult literacy education.

The Developmental Nature of Literacy Range and Power

I hope that I have made one thing obvious by now, and that is the realization that developing literacy range and power takes time; it is a gradual and long-term process. There are no quick fixes. Certainly adults can be trained to perform a restricted set of literacy tasks (in order to document "growth" on some standardized test or to do some job-related task), but that is not the same as helping them develop through literacy those higher-order thinking skills and problem-solving abilities that Berryman (1989) contends must be the goals of literacy education. Using literacy in its metalinguistic function, as Bruner (1986) describes it, to turn around on one's use of language in order to explore it, oneself, and the world is a lifelong effort that the most sophisticatedly-literate among us are engaged.

Whether the goal is to get adults "literate" in 100 hours or to get them performing on a job as soon as possible, quick fixes generally result in programs that treat literacy as a reductive set of skills, foster primarily a surface control of print, emphasize the transfer or "banking" of information, and contribute to the efforts of those who would use literacy as a means of domestication rather than a means of personal, social, economic, and political action. Moreover, as Kazemek (1985) has pointed out, quick fixes are dangerous to both adult students and instructors. The students don't develop the kind of literacy range and sophistication they have been led to believe they would in a short period of time, and when these "false hopes" and "expectations are not immediately realized in their own lives, adults often stop trying" (Kazemek, 1985, p. 333). Instructors and program directors, on the other hand, end up deluding themselves about the

nature of real student "gains" through the utilization of various test scores (Diekhoff, 1988).

What does all of this mean in practical terms of instruction and program development? It means that literacy educators must be honest and up front with adults concerning the kinds of literacy gains that can be made in certain periods of time. It also means that instructors must be candid about the amount of effort that literacy development will require: since literacy is a practice, it will require regular practice on the part of adults; it won't happen through osmosis or by simply participating with one's peers during a lesson. It is a truism that we learn to read by reading, and this applies to adults as well as children. Moreover, if we perceive literacy as a developmental process, it means that various programs and opportunities, if not instruction, must be provided for those adults who have completed some initial literacy education but want or need to further expand their reading and writing abilities. Community action groups interested in a particular topic, union groups concerned with workplace issues, writing workshops, book sharing circles, and cross-generational reading and writing activities are the kinds of things I have in mind. Lastly, it means that instructors must take a more active role in making adult students aware of the range of literacy functions and possibilities. Informal needs assessments which allow instructors and students, exploring together, to clarify objectives, goals, strengths, and areas that need development are absolutely necessary; however, such needs assessments can be simplistic. An adult with very limited literacy abilities might know what she wants in terms of initial literacy instruction, but probably doesn't know what she could want if she possessed greater range and power (Mezirow, 1985). It is thus the instructor's role to build on a student's

development by demonstrating and offering the range of possibilities that exist for all readers and writers.

Conclusion

With all of the hoopla concerning iliteracy and the crisis atmosphere generated by corporations and others concerning the growing lack of workplace literacy skills among the work force, it is easy to lose sight of what literacy is and what it is for. It is then too easy to develop programs and instruction which train (from Latin, "traginare," to draw) adults but do not educate (from Latin, "educere," to lead forth) them. Literacy educators must resist such attempts to trivialize the power of reading and writing. They must constantly and assertively through their actions and words argue for a literacy education that exploits the range of the possible language functions and fosters both individual perspective transformation and social transformation. They must help lead forth themselves, their students, and society.

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